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ABSTRACT

"Aerobic writing" is a writing center strategy designed to keep students in writing "shape." Like aerobic exercise, aerobic writing is sustained for a certain length of time and done on a regular basis at prescribed time intervals. The program requires students to write at least two times a week for approximately an hour each time. Students write, save what they have written, date it, and submit the work when they have accumulated eight to ten pieces. The teacher does not critique the work initially, but comments only on positive aspects of the paper or asks questions about the content. The idea is not to discourage the students with citations of structural errors, but to encourage the students to continue. After the students have submitted two batches, the teacher selects one or two promising pieces for each writer to expand, revise, and polish. The practice writing sessions are suspended while the students revise. During the course of a term, each student produces 30 to 40 pieces of writing, ranging from one to three pages. The teacher will conduct three to five conferences with each student as the term progresses. This aerobic strategy works particularly well with writing apprehensive students, since it builds confidence and, like any form of exercise, produces greater proficiency. (AEW)

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# "Aerobic" Writing: A Writing Practice Model

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> Like artistic performers and athletes, writers must practice consistently to develop muscle tone and endurance, so that fingers, hands, arms, eyes, and brains can function long and effectively at their peak (2).
>
> Ben McClelland in Writing Practice

## Introduction

The writing center I oversee is rich with resources: I have graduate assistants and peer tutors; we use computers and software, cassette players and tapes, books and handouts. And we have a lot of strategies to help people with their writing. But one of our best strategies--what I have called here "aerobic writing"--requires none of our fine resources.

I first used writing intended just for practice years ago in comp classes--something on the order of free (or as some students called them "forced") writings done in and out of class and saved like a journal. I believe strongly that, as Donald Hall put it in Writing Well, "...if the habit of writing remains alien to us, we will never learn to write with any naturalness (20)."

But as we all know, our students, whether in a traditional classroom or in the writing center, will not write regularly simply because we believe in it or say it's good for them. In fact, the idea of writing for practice

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(for fluency, for comfort and confidence) is so foreign to most students, indeed to many teachers, that some will rebel at it. At the very least, what is called for is a writing-for-practice schedule or model.

I first developed a systematic writing practice model for writers in my classroom; in the last few years I've developed and honed it for writing center writers as well. I use the writing practice model with all students enrolled in my writing lab credit course and some version of it with many drop-in students.

Theory

I always tell my writers not to apologize for what they are about to say, but I can't seem to resist an "apology": what I'm about to discuss as "theory" is basically some beliefs I hold. Indeed, the theory behind the writing practice model amounts to not much more than the fact that in developing any performance area skill--and writing is performance--two basics are required of the would-be performer: a "can-do" attitude and lots of practice.

Having confessed the relative insubstantiality of all this, here are some of the ideas in the background, a sort of credo:

To begin with, I think that the writing center can offer writing opportunities that are not offered in or that are in addition to those offered in the traditional classroom.

I think writing students whether in the classroom or in the writing center need to do more writing. And I think that writing for practice--with no teacher marks or response--can be worthwhile. Donald Hall again: "Writing is a skill, like an athletic skill, which comes more naturally to some people than to others but which improves with practice for everyone. Practice is a necessity (18)."

I think that in the writing center we may be able to undo damage that's done in the classroom to writers...that while students do too little writing, teachers typically do too much--in red ink, that is, finding errors, scrutinizing and responding to every little thing. Ken Macrorie says it well in Telling Writing:

> Marginal comments pointing out slips or mistakes in grammar, spelling, or mechanics are not ordinarily useful to a writer until he is polishing his work in final draft. The experience of thousands of teachers in American high schools and colleges has showed that such reading for correction...has had little positive effect (67).

Finally, I think that spot reviews and exercises may be appropriate for usage/mechanical problems, but that these problems may be addressed through writing practice also. And I think that as writing center staff we can always consider writing as an alternative to help a writer improve. (I don't think this always happens at all; I think altogether too often we turn to an exercise or a lesson.)

I know that I am not in uncharted territory here; comp theorists from Donald Graves to Mina Shaughnessy to Sondra Perl have covered this ground for us. The thing is that while writing practice may not make perfect writing (is that even a worthwhile goal?), it certainly gives the writer experience in finding her own voice and turning ideas and feelings into words, and this in turn builds confidence and comfort and fluency and ultimately promotes willingness to take risks with the writing.

Model

"Aerobic" writing is like aerobic exercise--at least in terms of scheduling, that is;"aerobic" writing is sustained continuously for a certain length of time and done on a regular basis at regular time intervals. Regularity is the key because, as McClelland puts it, "Setting and adhering to a schedule of regular workouts is essential to...writing improvement."

Here's the model I use: writers write at least two times a week for about an hour each time. (Fairly often, I prescribe four writings, two done in the center, two at home; occasionally when the situation warrants it, I set up a plan for daily writing.) I usually require Gene Krupa's Situational Writing as a sourcebook; most students can respond readily to the situations Krupa offers.

In the beginning, a writer on the writing practice model simply writes and saves her writings by date. I ask her to show me her work when she has accumulated eight to ten pieces (usually at the rate of one piece per day). At that time, I give verbal reader-response-type feedback. I do not critique at all this first time; instead, I try to do the opposite of what the classroom teacher may be doing: that is, I may say, "This is fine; you're doing so many things right: you make complete sentences, you make sense, you have something to say..." I keep the content and the

tone of the conversation positive. I may say things like, "I used to go fishing with my grandfather, too." Or ask questions like, "When did you go to school in Dallas?" In other words, I acknowledge the meaning in the writing. At this point, I do not even look for errors. (This takes considerable discipline for someone trained in the era of error-finding-as-teaching-writing.) At the end of the first conference, I usually say something like, "This is a good body of writing. Keep writing, and show me the work when you have another six to eight writings done."

When she presents me with another batch of writings, I typically read through these pieces, "listening" to the writer as she "speaks" in her texts and talking back occasionally as an interested reader. Then I look through everything she has written to this point, trying to find one or two promising pieces to be expanded, revised and perhaps polished. This is usually about the middle of the term, and she then may take a break from the practice writing schedule and work on revising a piece. After a piece is done, the writer returns to practice writing, and I say "Keep writing" and give all the encouragement I can. (Donald Murray writes about this technique in a reverie called "The Listening Eye: Reflections on the Writing Conference." It is required reading for my staff.)

During the course of a term a typical writer will produce 30 to 40 pieces of writing, ranging from one to

three pages, and I, or an intern, will have from three to five conferences with her. In each conference I say more than anything else, "Keep writing."

A "Case Study"

Nancy R. is a young woman in her late 20s who enrolled in our English 2100, "writing lab," after having finished freshman comp and world lit. She is bright, pretty, has worked as a model to help send her husband to medical school. On her first day in the writing center, we, an intern and I, signed her in and explained the writing practice model we require. On her second day here, Nancy learned to word process. On the fourth day, Nancy wrote the following response to Krupa's "Situation One." (I include her work with her knowledge and permission.)

I am Nancy R_____, I'm an older student who returned to college after working for four years.

I am having trouble with classes requiring essays or papers to be written. I have a poor background in grammor, spelling and writing. I tend to avoid classes which will be requiring papers to be written because I don't write well.

I hope to gain the knowledge I missed in my education so that I will be able to write letters, papers or essays correctly. 1/14/86

Nancy had no trouble expressing her concerns: her length of time out of school, her age, her "trouble with classes requiring essays," her "poor background," her avoidance of classes with writing requirement, her hopes. But we could

see her discomfort in the hour she spent to produce these 82 words.

The fifth day (second writing), Nancy was still uncomfortable--with us now as well as with herself and her writing. She spent an hour with us and produced one small paragraph: 111 words. On the fourth day, Nancy rather angrily (and it seemed out of character) demanded that we put her on the grammar modules, saying that she couldn't see how "writing is going to help me" improve in writing. The intern and I listened but explained very little; we assured her that the writing practice would help and we encouraged her to keep writing.

Nancy did keep writing. She wrote 29 pieces and, at my suggestion, revised several of these. Here, taken directly from her floppy disk, is the first paragraph of writing #27, which totalled 576 words:

My husband was in his Radiology residency while I was attending school full time and modeling part time. I was making extra money as a fashion model and I wanted to do something different with it instead of putting it into our savings account. I decided that I wanted to learn about the stock market, so I could invest the money that I had earned and hopefully make more by investing wisely.I didn't really think I would make any money at first, I just thought it would be fun to learn how the stock market worked. I did some research by reading a few books and by reading the financial section of the newspaper. I found out you can invest as little as one hundred dollars in the stock market and still buy enough shares in a company to make a profit if the stock goes up.. I called a girlfriend who was a stockbroker and asked her for some advise.She advised me to invest in a stable long term growth stock, which is good advise but I wanted to play a little and accept some risk in my venture since this money was extra income. I was more

intrested in a local yogurt company.I realized I was eating This Can't be Yogurt every day for a snack , so I checked into the company and found out that it was a locally owned company and that the company would soon be selling stock to the public.the shares would be less than ten dollars a share which fit into my plan of investing. I remembered reading that for first time investors you should pick something you are familar with or invest in a locally owned company . T.C.B.Y. fit both areas. I did not take my friends advise and I invested in the yogurt company. That invesment turned out to be a wise move the company has had three stock splits in a year and a half and the stock has gone from seven dollars a share to thirty_-five dollars a share. I have also been looking for an area I might enjoy as a career and investing now looked like a possiblity.

Although she did not polish this piece, Nancy clearly by this time had found her voice and a good measure of comfort in "extending her discourse," as a colleague who teaches comp theory puts it. Best of all, she is on her way to learning to write well because she believes she can.

Addendum: Nancy returned to the writing center as a drop-in student the following term for some help with her polishing skills. She and I both know she has work to do in mastering some usage conventions, but I am certain that we could not have succeeded with Nancy by focusing on the conventions at the outset.

## Conclusion

The writing practice model--"aerobic" writing--works well for students with "writing anxiety," as I hope is evident from Nancy R's experience, and with most other inexperienced

writers as well. I think this is so because what we are asking of students is something constructive in the most basic sense of the word: they must construct the words that become the sentences that become the paragraphs that become the discourse. It--the writing practice--is also constructive in the sense that it is positive as compared to the usually destructive/negative find-the-errors approach. Finally, writing for practice is constructive precisely because it is practice--practice that builds comfort and ultimately, like any practice, greater proficiency.

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